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Caroline Heim

'Argue with Us!': Audience Co-creation through Post-Performance Discussions

In this article Caroline Heim explores a new avenue for audience contribution to the theatrical event that has emerged as increasingly important over the past decade: post-performance discussions. With the exception of such theatres that encourage argument as the Staatstheater Stuttgart, most extant audience discussions in Western mainstream theatres privilege the voice of the theatre expert. Case studies of post-performance discussions held after performances of *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* trial a new model of audience co-creation. An audience text which informs the theatrical event is created, and a new role, that of audience critic, is established in the process. Caroline Heim is a lecturer in Performance Studies at Queensland University of Technology. Her PhD examined the changing role of theatre audiences in recent years.

POST-PERFORMANCE discussions, which have risen significantly in popularity since 2002, are an under-explored and under-utilized avenue for audience contribution to the theatrical event.¹ Most Western theatre companies that hold post-performance discussions follow either a question-and-answer or expert-driven model, both of which perpetuate an 'expert agenda' that can be seen as didactic and to devalue any audience contributions.² The highly anticipated post-show question 'how did you learn all those lines?' inevitably leads to further expounding by onstage arts professionals rather than audience members.³

This article introduces a new method for facilitating post-performance discussions that encourages audience contribution and privileges the audience voice. Case studies of post-performance discussions held after performances of Crossbow Production's staging of Maxwell Anderson's *Anne of the Thousand Days* in 2006 and Queensland Theatre Company's production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 2007 trialled this new discussion model.⁴ Through the post-performance discussions, audience members became active contributors to and co-creators of the theatrical event through their self-direction, their negotiation of meanings, and their performed role as critics. During the

post-performance discussions, an 'audience text' was produced that changed, shaped and re-articulated the meanings of the theatrical experience for all those participating.

The audience's contributory role in the theatrical event has changed extensively, particularly over the past century. Analyses of audience behaviour clearly reveal that contemporary audiences play a less contributory role than they have in the past. Baz Kershaw, Richard Butsch, and Neil Blackadder have explored changes in audience contribution over the past century, including the disempowerment of the theatre audience, the decline in audience sovereignty, and the change from active to passive spectatorship.⁵ Due to changes in theatre architecture, the rise in power of arts professionals, changes in audience demographics, and the rise of a commodity culture, contemporary audience contribution has been largely relegated to laughter and applause.⁶

Over the course of the twentieth century, the theatre gradually evolved from a well-lit social meeting place, where audience members made verbal contributions and criticisms during performances, to a place where audiences sit quietly in the dark, applaud, purchase some theatre merchandise, and exit the theatre.⁷ Contemporary audiences have become acculturated to their more silent role,

yet new opportunities for contribution have emerged that have the potential to reinstate the audience voice – namely, post-performance discussions and online-feedback.

Two models for post-performance discussions have become widespread since the inception of the post-performance discussion in the 1950s.⁸ Although neither carry any formal title in practice, they are identified here as the expert-driven model and the question-and-answer model. In the expert-driven model, an 'expert' or group of experts directs the post-performance discussions, which can take one of two forms – a lengthy lecture sometimes followed by a short period of audience questions, or a short lecture followed by a lengthy period of audience questions. The expert can be an arts professional closely associated with the play such as the director, the dramaturge, or the playwright, or, alternatively, a specialist in areas covered by the thesis of the play or the issues raised by the play.

As Janna Goodwin argues, 'Postmodern postshows, if dominated by theorizing artists or simply by scholarly perspectives, can force the conversation into an analytic mode in which the only way to interpret the piece and to contribute to the discussion is to critically examine aesthetics.'⁹ The expert-driven model fosters an intellectual environment in which audience contributions, if encouraged at all, are expected to conform to the cerebral thoughts of the expert in both expression and content. A large percentage of the audience, daunted and intimidated by the expert environment, are hesitant to contribute to the discussion or even ask questions.

The question-and-answer model is generally facilitated by the director alongside whom actors, playwright, and any other members of the production are invited to participate. After a brief introduction, the director will invite the audience to ask questions about the performance or the play. Most of the questions are directed to the actors and are answered by the actors unless, in the case of a new play, the playwright is present. Often these discussions can transform into an expert-driven discussion as one or more actors share anecdotes from their

audition or the rehearsals. It is interesting to note that, at these times, the post-performance discussions tend to be seen as an additional performance or as an encore. The actors share stories, often re-enacting the event with physical gestures and comments to each other. The audience watches and laughs appropriately.

For some actors, participation in post-performance discussions is a particularly onerous task. After the demands of performing, most actors would prefer to retire to the bar for a drink rather than answer a set of predictable questions. And actors are often hesitant to interact with the audience and prefer to preserve the relationship of character–audience rather than create a new relationship of actor–audience. Another rarely discussed reason for the actor's reluctance to participate in post-performance discussions is insecurity. Added demands are placed on the actor in post-performance discussions that are often outside their expertise. These discussions require actors not only to be experts in the field of performing, but also to have detailed knowledge of the play and/or the issues the play explores.

The objective of post-performance discussions in mainstream theatres in capital cities is, as New York's Lincoln Center Theater succinctly articulates, 'to provide a lively forum for leading authors, actors, directors and designers to talk about their work with audience members'.¹⁰ Extant discussions are designed, perhaps, to extend the pleasure of the theatrical experience. They fail, however, to allow the audience to contribute beyond asking questions. Post-performance discussions have been relegated to educational or entertaining events that perpetuate a hegemonic hierarchy.

It is unfortunate that the majority of mainstream theatres have been caught in the myopia of adopting one of these models. Many latent techniques for audience discussions that direct the gaze onto the audience are yet to be trialled in the mainstream theatre arena. The community conversation, often following personal narrative performances and new plays exploring community issues, encourages the audience to respond

directly to issues raised in the play.¹¹ Laurie Brooks's Boal-influenced talkbacks are directed by a facilitator with actors remaining in character and continuing a dialogue with the audience.¹² These models encourage more audience discussion, yet they remain under-developed.

It is significant that in both the extant mainstream models, the majority of talking is undertaken by the experts involved. Although at times some audience discussion evolves, the predominant audience discourse is made up of questions directed to the experts. Bennett asserts that post-performance discussions have 'a tendency towards didacticism'.¹³ This is an understatement. Both models interpellate and further marginalize the theatre audience. The primary objective of currently practised mainstream discussions is for the audience to receive further insights into the written text, performance text, and public discourses.¹⁴

Of course, this affects the facilitating and the environment of the post-performance discussion. The directive facilitating of the expert-driven model creates a classroom environment, perpetuating the receptive role of the audience. The question-and-answer model often excludes the audience as actors engage in a *tête-à-tête* of anecdotes and inside jokes. In many ways the chasm between stage and audience is widened as the audience role changes from receptor to student. During a time that has the potential to create and foster relationships between the arts professionals and the audience, the arts professionals' role enlarges in importance and the audience remains unknown.

One mainstream theatre that encourages more audience contribution is the Staatstheater Stuttgart, one of the largest theatres in southern Germany that predominantly produces a repertoire of classical plays. The Schauspiel Stuttgart, based within the Staatstheater, holds regular post-performance discussions not just as an extension of pleasure in the theatrical event, but prompted by a basic audience need to 'protest'. During the opening night performance of Volker Losch's *Dogville* at the Schauspiel Stuttgart in 2007, audience members shouted out 'Stop, stop!' at the stage during an explicit rape scene.¹⁵

Other audience members protested against these comments and remarked, 'No, it is necessary.'

On the opening night of Ulrich Rasche's *Kirchenlieder* in 2006, audience members, enraged at elements of the play and production, started to smash down the doors of the theatre.¹⁶ Post-performance discussions were held after performances of each of these plays, some lasting up to two hours, to give the audience the opportunity to air their opinions and discuss their volatile responses to the plays. Both plays attracted responses ripe for a rich post-performance discussion.

The principal dramaturge at the Schauspiel Stuttgart, Joerg Bochow, states that *Publikumsgespräche* are held to give the audience the opportunity to 'discuss what they protest against or what they like in the plays'.¹⁷ Perhaps in response to the smashing of doors during the opening night of *Kirchenlieder*, the theatre's website page on *Publikumsgespräche* states that the theatre company 'eagerly awaits' discussion with the audience 'even if it leads to doors slamming.' It goes on to encourage audiences to attend post-performance discussions in order to 'Argue with us!'¹⁸

In an enlightened perspective of theatre company-audience relations, Bochow comments that post-performance discussions are held to 'include the audience in our work [by creating] a way for the audience to participate on equal terms. [The *Publikumsgespräche*] create a permanent discussion with the audience.'¹⁹ This is a two-way relationship. The audience have indicated through their opening-night protests that they desire a voice in the theatrical event. Instead of a negative response to this excessive audience behaviour, the theatre company has given the audience a vehicle for expression through the post-performance discussion.

Furthermore, audiences are given the opportunity to co-create through the discussions. Bochow states that in their classical repertoire season a discussion about a play such as *Faust* will include audience interpretations of the text in relation to the production. The dramaturge's interpretation of

the play is often challenged by audience members incensed that classical texts have been edited. The Schauspiel Stuttgart encourages this kind of debate, arguing that the discussions are 'best if there is not one opinion, but contradictory ideas and perceptions',²⁰ What Bochow calls a 'permanent discussion with the audience' enriches the experience of the theatrical event for audience and theatre professionals alike.

As this form of discussion is not common practice in Australia, it was necessary to devise a new discussion model to encourage audience contributions. Carl Rogers's framework of person-centered psychotherapy provided the most useful paradigm to encourage audience contributions in an unregulated environment.²¹ The theoretical framework for the discussion model was informed by the basic axioms underpinning Rogers's therapeutic practices: facilitation, a 'non-directive' attitude, 'climate-setting', and 'positive regard'.

Crossbow Productions employed the new discussion model for its staging of *Anne of the Thousand Days*, which ran for two weeks at the Brisbane Powerhouse. The model was slightly revised and trialled again at discussions following Queensland Theatre Company's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* at the Cremorne Theatre. Three discussions were held after selected performances of each production. To avoid a question-and-answer session, the actors and director were not present either on stage or in the audience. The present author facilitated both sets of discussions, commencing with a brief introduction intended to promote what Rogers referred to as a 'growth producing climate', espousing a non-directive approach that made it psychologically safe for audience members to contribute their comments:

The purpose of the audience discussion this evening is to give you, the audience, the opportunity to share your ideas, your views your thoughts, your feelings on Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* that you saw this evening. So it won't really be a question-and-answer session as such. More of an opportunity for you to 'play critic' for the evening. I was trying to work out how to start a discussion

after a play such as *Virginia Woolf* and one idea I came up with this afternoon was to play a game.

General laughter.

'Attack the Audience?'

General laughter.

I don't think we'll go there. Just to get us started, I will ask one question: what were some of the thoughts that you had or feelings you were left with directly after the play finished? To get started, would someone like to share a comment that they made to a friend just after the lights went up at the conclusion of the play? Just to get us started.

A facilitator mediating the discussions rather than an expert or director was important. A non-directive approach provided a viable alternative that emancipated the theatre audience by giving them a voice that was self-rather than expert-directed. The discussion needed to be reasonably unstructured to allow for the group's self-direction and discursive discussion. Rogers's theory of positive regard was adapted, creating a simple method of 'prizing' the audience's comments that would validate their contribution.

Whenever a contribution was made that was not immediately followed up by a comment made by another audience member, the facilitator would interject a comment such as 'Thank you for that' or 'That's a really interesting observation.' Positive regard was further established through the facilitator offering the audience a role to play – that of critic. Encouraging the audience to 'play critic', inverted the more familiar expert-student dynamic prescribed by the expert and question-and-answer models. It not only privileged the audience voice but gave the audience a language and a framework for their contributions which consisted of critical response, feedback, opinions, or however the language of the critic was perceived by each individual audience member.

Asking the audience to share a comment that they had already articulated inverted the expert-audience role by encouraging the audience to contribute their own expert opinions about the play they had just experienced and to take on the role of self-directed

critic. It also gave the audience a perforative role that added to the textual fabric of the theatrical event. In one sense, the audience became performers of their own audience text.

There were initial problems with the introduction of the new discussion format. After the facilitator introduction at the post-performance discussions following *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, audience performers at both productions, unaccustomed to making contributions in a non-directive environment, were at first at a loss with how to proceed. Inevitably, compliments, a hallmark of the question and answer model, initiated the discussion such as 'I thought it was fantastic' and 'I'd just like to say the whole thing was wonderful.' In a number of discussions, direct questions were asked of the facilitator: 'Near the end of the play, what were the blue lights in the audience meant to be?'

To encourage audience authorship, compliments and questions were directed back to the audience: 'What were you thinking as an audience when those blue lights were coming on?' Directing such questions back to the audience almost became part of a nurturing process through which the facilitator placed the onus on the audience to create a critical text by interpellating them as critics. Through this, the audience members became more familiar with the purposes of the new model and were able to break free from the constraints of the question-and-answer and expert models.

Although it took a significant amount of time for post-performance discussion preconceptions to be subverted, the audience text then evolved into a group-directed, critical discussion rich in analytical, emotional, and highly perceptive contributions. By the end of the discussions, which were, unfortunately, all just gaining momentum at the twenty-minute closing time, the facilitator was only playing a small role in the discussion. Shedding the role of student, audiences embraced the role of critic. Humour frequented the discussions and set a relaxed, informal tone.

The most significant transformation in the

audience role took place when audience performers began to ask questions of each other and self-direct. The facilitator became another group member and was, interestingly, completely cut off in mid-sentence at two points, and sometimes ignored. As the post-performance discussions proceeded, the audiences began to 'own' the discussion:

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 15. I question why an audience would find four drunks falling around on stage playing games funny.

General laughter

What does it say about us?

General laughter

FACILITATOR. What does that say about us? Is that the part where we saw the humour or –

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 16. I thought it was realistic.

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 3 Realistic. It depicts us?

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 16. We're all drunks!

General laughter

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 32. It's funny because they're doing things that they wouldn't normally do. It's not actually them. They are actually influenced by something else.

The audience-directed questions almost lost their significance as enquiries. Instead, they emerged as conscious musings, filling in the gaps of narrative in the meaning-making process and negotiating and sharing meanings with other audience performers.

In one of the *Anne of the Thousand Days* discussions, audience negotiation of meaning regarding the costume discourse caused dissension:

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 9. I found it very much a costume parade. I think it rather detracted from the play itself. I think you tended to look at the costumes rather than . . .

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 1. I thought it complemented it actually. It's interesting. I admire that you take a different viewpoint.

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 2. If something actually happened at an actual point in history, I like to see it presented in that style. I like to be taken back to the time it was written.

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 9. But they weren't the costumes of the time!

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 2. Well, I wouldn't know.

This costume discourse is a pertinent example of how the audience discussion at times became a dialectical debate. Some members of the audience shared interpretive strategies for the writing of the discussion. In this way, the process of negotiation in the discussions was collaborative.

This process is not dissimilar to the relationship of the director and the lighting designer, composer, and costume designer, who work collaboratively to negotiate a common meaning for the theatrical event. The audience performers contributed several meanings and, in the process of negotiation, some meanings were refuted and others accepted and, at times, refined. The discussion emerged as a series of negotiated meanings. Engaged in this process, the audience became an interpretive community in the meaning-making process.

The audience performers' pleasure in the negotiation of meaning was obvious. While Anne Ubersfeld's ambit of theatrical pleasures experienced by the audience reader is broad, she argues, 'the pleasure of the sign . . . is the most semiotic of all pleasures'. The meaning-making process experienced by an audience when confronted by an onstage sign 'is the very source of theatrical pleasure.'²² One audience performer noted

I liked the bed, either as a bed or as another object in the centre of the stage because I think it continually symbolized one of Henry's crucial problems: his problem of maintaining the male line, his obsession with it. So even when the bed is not a bed, it's still there symbolizing that issue.

This is a pertinent example of what Ubersfeld describes as the replacement of a person or an issue by an object. In this illustration, the audience performer's theorizing is rich in symbolism and semiotic meaning and her or his pleasure in the act of meaning-making is palpable.

Through self-direction and the negotiation of meanings, audience members performed the role of critic. The voice of the audience critic was a voice of authority:

opinionated, expressive, articulate, and discerning. The new post-performance discussion model encouraged critical contribution to the play rather than adherence to a certain expert-driven ideology. Contributions were evaluative and interpretative, as well as fault-finding:

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 14. You can't see *Anne of the Thousand Days* as an historical play. It is about relationships that probably didn't come into play at the time. . . . The different chronological layers. . . . A sixteenth-century play written in the middle of the twentieth century and then in this production deliberately anachronistic costuming. Then the music, which is again very anachronistic two hundred years later than the play itself. So you get all these layers. You're given so much more to think about than just a simple history like all the other Tudor plays.

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 8. I like the historical notes [in the programme] and the choices that were deliberately made for this production. I have to admit, I don't like the cover very much. I like the picture very much but I don't like the 'sex plus marriage equals bloodshed'. I feel a bit hit over the head.

AUDIENCE PERFORMER 14. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is all about truth and illusion. It's almost probably a bit of a catch to say [George and Martha] loved each other – you could, perhaps, see it as another form of abuse.

The audience critic was preoccupied with making meaning, negotiating meaning, and contributing meaning in an attempt to broaden and enrich their experience of the theatrical event. The audience regained their status as an interpretative community of critical contributors.

Contributions from audience members also shaped subsequent performances. The director of *Anne of the Thousand Days* was sitting in the audience for performances and post-performance discussions. The comments made by an audience participant at the first post-performance discussion influenced this director's reading of the character of Anne Boleyn. The participant commented:

What didn't come across was the fact that [Anne] held [Henry] enthralled for ten years, yet none of her charm, or whatever it was she

had, seemed to come across. Her strength did. But she seemed to be always cranky. . . . That wasn't the acting, that was more in the script. There should have been more of whatever it was that she had that held him. It didn't come across. All she ever did was fight with him.

Although another participant argued against this, the director held additional rehearsals to explore another colour in the construction of Anne Boleyn and adopted these revisions for subsequent performances. The purpose in this reworking was to explore a different reading. The audience comment, therefore, actively contributed to the performance text. This is one example of how the audiences at these post-performance discussions can be seen to play a vital role in co-creation of the theatrical event.

It is difficult to assess whether the contributions made during the post-performance discussions changed, added to, enriched, or influenced what the audiences of *Anne of the Thousand Days* or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* brought home with them. It is reasonable to speculate that any additional insights into the experienced theatrical event given at the post-performance discussion would necessarily offer a different perspective upon the event for other audience members, even if the insights were contrary to the opinions of the performers. The discussions did, however, fulfil their purpose in giving the audience the opportunity to contribute meaning through the creation of a co-authored audience text.

Transcribed, the post-performance discussion audience text can be considered autonomously as a review or as an epilogue to the written text. As a performed text, it can be seen as a continuation of the performance text, where the audience performers form an interpretive community of critics and create meanings that emerge as a text. The audience text – replete with issues of contemporary relevance, intuitive discourse, and emotive responses – added meaning to the theatrical experience at both of the events for audience members.

The emancipated audience voice was fluid; it changed at each performance and was

rewritten each night. Whether it is considered a written or a performed text or, indeed, both, the vital audience text that emerged in the post-performance discussions of *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* formed an integral part of the theatrical event itself. The audience text assumed its place alongside the written text, the performance text, and the public discourses not only because it worked to inform each of these texts, but also because it was articulated by natural and essential co-creators of the theatrical event: the audience.

For the audience, the theatrical event continues long after the event itself through comments between individuals or groups while leaving the theatre, at the theatre bar, during the ride home, or in coffee shops after the performance has ended. These comments are the voice of the audience and are as much a part of the experience as the play itself, yet must be carried out in a surreptitious manner in closed conversations after the event. This multiform audience text remains, therefore, a dismembered part of the theatrical experience that is part of, but does not directly inform, the theatrical event.

Since these vital contributions are only shared between small groups, they only contribute meaning for the individuals involved. The audience texts are fragmented and disparate, yet they are still important. Opportunities for audience discourse, even of this nature, are diminishing. Intervals have long provided an opportunity for audiences to relax in their own 'audience support space' while creating a critical audience text.²³ Yet, for their own purposes, theatre companies are now excluding intervals from the theatrical experience.

But do theatre audiences desire to engage more with the arts experience of the theatrical event, or is the post-performance discussion another marketing tool for audience development? The number of voluntary audience performers in post-performance discussions held after *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* suggests that audiences were, in fact, eager to contribute to the two events. After both

productions, a significant number of audience members stayed to participate in the discussions. Subsequent productions staged by Crossbow Productions witnessed a rise in attendance at post-performance discussions. Entire audiences participated in discussions following Nicholas Wright's *Mrs Klein* in 2007, and these were extended from twenty to thirty-five minutes to give everyone an opportunity to contribute following performances of William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* in 2009 and Nicholas Wright's *Shadowlands* in 2010.²⁴ For the latter production, Crossbow included an online feedback section on their website.

Such opportunities for online audience response are growing. Theatre companies create blackboards or clipboards for audiences to post their comments on the productions they have seen. After attending a production at the National Theatre in London, audiences are forwarded emails inviting them to 'Tell us your thoughts on [the] play by visiting [the National's] talkback page.'²⁵ The Staatstheater Kassel in Germany has a site named 'Play the Role of a Critic' on which audiences can post their review of a play.

Newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Times* are responding to the call of the audience by publishing reviews of plays written by audience members, while online newspapers include audience blogs in their arts sections. Many theatre companies such as the Queensland Theatre Company and the Melbourne Theatre Company include links to the social network site Facebook on their websites. However, these online opportunities for audience contribution again remain separated from the theatrical event itself. Online feedback is an area that is presently evolving, and the online contribution opportunities noted here only scratch the surface. The most important outcome of this growth in audience feedback is what can be seen as the privileging of the audience voice. Whether this escalation is market-driven or audience-driven is yet to be determined. From either perspective, these directions can be seen to herald a new age for audience contribution.

Lynne Connor argues that contemporary theatre audiences desire to co-author meaning:

They don't want the arts; they want the arts experience. They want the opportunity to participate – in an intelligent and responsible way – in telling the meaning of an arts event. . . . They want a real forum – or several forums – for the interplay of ideas, experience, data, and feeling that makes up the arts experience.²⁶

This participation in the arts event is evidenced in the growing interest in the audience discussion in the Western world. Although a relatively new phenomenon, there are very few capital city mainstream theatre companies that do not schedule some form of audience discussion as part of the theatrical event, or provide some avenue for online feedback on their websites.

Despite the fact that a large number of online opportunities for audiences to provide feedback to theatre companies has surfaced over the past few years, the audience voice is still considered of secondary importance to the voice of the arts professional. Post-performance discussions provide an opportunity to reopen the discourse between stage and audience. Discussions that privilege the audience voice have the potential to create new meanings for the theatrical event and new theatre communities of audience critics. Audiences have a contributory role to play in the mainstream theatrical event that is far more active than their current acknowledged role as passive or sometimes active receivers. Exploration of the audience voice as a text that is an integral part of the theatrical event is long overdue. The audience text is a vibrant, multivocal discourse that has remained in the foyer for far too long.

Notes and References

1. Particularly in New York, audience discussions grew in popularity between 2002 and 2004. Costly display advertisements in the *New York Times* publicized 'Post-show Talkbacks'. Independent Broadway theatres such as the Booth Theater, the Helen Hayes Theater, and the Lyceum held regular Tuesday- or Wednesday-night talkbacks which were mediated by the playwright, the lead actor or actress, or the cast. Edward Albee conducted talkbacks of *The Goat* at the Golden Theater in

2004, while in 2003 lead actress Tovah Feldshuh had mediated talkbacks of the long running *Golda's Balcony* at the Helen Hayes Theater after every matinee. Interest in the audience talkback spread rapidly to Off-Broadway theatres, and by 2003 Off-Broadway plays were advertising post-show talkbacks in the *New York Times* theatre directory. In Off-Broadway theatres such as the Bleecker Theater, the Century Center, and the Westside Theater talkbacks were mediated by playwrights, activists – and even nuns.

2. Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: a Theory of Production and Reception* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 164.

3. For the disempowerment of the role of the audience and the rise of the privileging of the arts professionals from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century, see Baz Kershaw, 'Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in Twentieth-Century Theatre', *Modern Drama*, XLII, No. 2 (2001), p. 133–54, and Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 192–5.

4. *Anne of the Thousand Days*, directed by Christian Heim, Visy Theatre, Brisbane Powerhouse, Australia, 7–17 June 2006; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, directed by Michael Gow, Cremorne Theatre, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Australia, 2 October–3 November 2007.

5. See, Kershaw, 'Unruly Audiences'; Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Neil Blackadder, *Performing Opposition: Modern Theatre and the Scandalized Audience* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

6. Caroline Heim, *Theatre Audience Contribution: Facilitating a New Text through the Post-Performance Discussion* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic, 2010), p. 98.

7. The gallery audiences of the early twentieth century, comprised predominantly of middle-class women, played the role of critic in the theatrical event. Producers and dramatists looked to the gallery for critical response. Their predecessors, the gallery boys of the second half of the nineteenth century, were considered trained and hardened critics. See Richard Butsch, *American Audiences*.

8. As indicated by entries in the *New York Times*, the Actor's Playhouse in New York first introduced audience discussions in 1959. Post-performance discussions, facilitated by a moderator were held weekly after performances of Arthur Miller's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. The National Theatre in London introduced 'platforms' in 1963, which were originally staged readings of plays. These evolved into audience discussions facilitated by a chair in the late 1970s. By the late eighties platforms occurred, on average, twice a week. The National platforms continue to be an integral part of the theatre's culture. Similarly, the Manhattan Theatre Club introduced post-performance discussions in 1973. Discussions occurred after each performance and were advertised in the *New York Times*. In the eighties, coinciding with the rise of the spectacle musical, audience discussions declined in popularity.

9. Janna Goodwin, 'The Productive Postshow: Facilitating, Understanding, and Optimizing Personal Narratives in Audience Talk Following a Personal Narrative Performance', *Theatre Topics*, XIV, No. 1 (2004), p. 336.

10. <<http://lct.org/talksPlatformSeries.htm>>,

accessed 5 October 2011.

11. Anne Ellis, 'The Art of Community Conversation', *Theatre Topics*, X, No. 2 (2000), p. 91.

12. Laurie Brooks, 'Put a Little Boal in Your Talkback', *American Theatre*, XXII, No. 10 (2005), p. 58–60.

13. Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, p. 164.

14. In Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 91–100, Knowles introduces the term 'public discourses' to describe a range of texts or signifiers that inform the conditions of reception. Marvin Carlson, in *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. xiv, has constructed a limited list of these signifiers in his research into theatre semiotics, and I would here like to build on and categorize Carlson's and Knowles's lists of public discourses. This list, although not exhaustive, includes written texts such as posters, flyers, and programme notes; spatial texts such as the auditorium, foyer, and amenities; visual texts such as costuming, scenography, lighting, and lobby displays; auditory texts such as production music, sound effects, and music played during interval; and sensory texts such as refreshments sold at the coffee bar and the comfort of seats in the auditorium.

15. *Dogville*, directed by Volker Losch, Schauspiel Stuttgart, Germany, 2007.

16. *Kirchenlieder*, directed by Ulrich Rasche, Schauspiel Stuttgart, Germany, 2006.

17. Joerg Bochow, personal interview, 27 June 2007.

18. <www.staatstheatre-stuttgart.de/schauspiel/theatrepaedagogik/Publikumsgespraeche.php>, accessed 2 February 2008.

19. Joerg Bochow, personal interview, 27 June 2007.

20. Ibid.

21. Howard Kirschenbaum and Valerie Land Henderson, ed., *The Carl Rogers Reader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

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